

CHAPTER XII

PRAYER

'What is there that can justify tears and lamentations?'

Saying of the Buddha.

782 DOWN below my house, in a grove of palms near
[345] the river, was a little rest-house. It was but a roof
and a floor of teak boarding without any walls, and
it was plainly built. It might have held, perhaps,
twenty people; and here, as I strolled past in the
evening when the sun was setting, I would see two
or three old men sitting with beads in their hands.
They were making their devotions, saying to them-
selves that the world was all trouble, all weariness,
and that there was no rest anywhere except in
observing the laws of righteousness. It was very
pathetic, I thought, to see them there, saying this
over and over again, as they told their beads
through their withered fingers, for surely there was
no necessity for them to learn it. Has not every-
one learnt it, this, the first truth of Buddhism, long
before his hair is gray, before his hands are shaking,
before his teeth are gone? But there they would
sit, evening after evening, thinking of the change

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of course there were limits to the latitude allowed to him. The neglect of these conventions was supposed to result in disaster to the troupe and the death through diarrhoea of the actor who took the part or cracked the joke, and it would certainly result in the whole troupe being beaten by the audience and then put in prison by the officials. On the whole, the charge of irreligiosity attributed to the actors was not justified, and throughout the years, they had never been known even to attempt to evade the conventions. There were also conventions connected with social decorum. Kissing was not allowed on the stage. Although no penalty, supposed or real, was attached to it, this convention has never been broken. The actors could wear reproductions of all the regalia of a king, except the golden shoes, which only the king himself and princes in the line of succession could wear. The breaking of this rule was supposed to result in the death by diarrhoea of the actor who wore the shoes, but it was not punishable as a crime if they were actually worn on the stage, and it is known to have been broken sometimes. All the conventions, including those connected with spirit-dancing, still exist at the present day.

During the decadent period the platform stage, the elaborate scenery and curtains were introduced from French and English sources, for French touring companies often performed before the court towards the close of Mindon's reign (1853-78), and from about 1870 English touring companies of actors often visited Rangoon. With the performances of these companies of European actors, the general public had no contact. At the court the king and a few courtiers, out of respect for the French embassy, witnessed presentations of French operettas, but as they did not understand French and the actors could speak no Burmese, the court found the performances boring at times. At Rangoon the English actors presented musical comedies, or more truly, musical shows, to an audience composed entirely of English residents. It must be stated that the touring actors did in no way introduce specimens of the French or English dramas, for what they presented were third-rate musical shows. But they did introduce some examples of western stage-craft, and the Burmese professional actors, ever on the alert for borrowings, copied wholesale the platform stage, the curtain, and the elaborate stage scenery, with the result that, during the decadent period, the Burmese stage came to be a copy of the European stage. At Rangoon a permanent theatre was even built, a thing unknown to

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536* Burmese drama before, and most of U Ku's plays and *The History of*
177 *Thaton* and *Saw-phay* and *Saw-may* were produced at that theatre.
345 Admission to a performance was by payment, a practice alien to
dramatic performances before the decadent period. The rise of
'matinee idols' resulted in the chief actor, instead of the leader of the
orchestra, becoming the head of a troupe of actors. Formerly, a
dramatic performance took place during the afternoon or early evening,
but now because of the repeated applause for the popular 'idols',
a performance lasted throughout the night.

554 I have stated how the prejudice against professional actors increas-
536 ed rather than diminished through the coming of popular actors or
178 actresses and the resulting rivalry between different troupes. But
the prejudice was gradually overcome through the efforts of one man,
Po Sein, who used to perform with two ex-soldiers standing beside him
with rifles. By about 1912, his reputation as a leading actor was firmly
established, and from that time onwards he concerned himself with
raising the prestige of his profession by destroying the bitterness and
the ugliness that had crept into it. By his charm of manner and
personality, he soon established himself as the undisputed leader of
the profession. His generous gifts to charity and irreproachable
conduct soon acquitted the profession from the charge of immorality
and irreligiosity. During the Great War he contributed much
to the Red Cross Fund. For his services to charity and his profession,
he was given a title by the Government in 1919. Such an honour had
never been given before to an actor (had such a thing happened under
the Burmese kings or even before 1914, the officials would certainly
have vehemently protested, taking it as an insult to their class), and the
Government's action was the final denial of the old dictum that actors
and beggars were outside the pale of good society.

2. THE PUPPET SHOW

536* According to common tradition, the Burmese puppet show came
175 into being long before the drama, but as our knowledge of the history
of the puppet show before the reign of Bodawpaya (1782-1819) is
meagre, perhaps it will be better to consider first the puppet's history
from that reign.

[645] It will be remembered that, as stated in Chapter II, Bodawpaya,
under whom the court and the 'people's' dramas united together to
give rise to a national drama, created a new ministry, that of the stage.
The new minister, being a conservative courtier, wanted the drama